

Chapter One

I tried to warn them but they would not listen. The white man never listens to the Indian anyway.

Outside my hut, men cried out in the cold night, running for their lives, the glow of their torches and lanterns rushing past, their guns firing from all around. Some of their bullets cracked through the thin walls of my hut, while I sat with my back to the door, afraid to turn and look, crying out to my forefathers for protection, raising my voice against the heavy weight of my fear. It already knew where I was, the dark spirit of that place, protector of the Valley of Wonder, the sacred valley of our ancestors.

Outside, the cries from the miners broke off one by one, some shrill, others in low grunts. Their gunfire tapered with each taking of a life. When the shooting finally stopped, his triumphant scream filled the air. The shrill laugh that followed sent chills across my shoulders and down my back.

A heavy silence fell over the gold camp, a time of breathlessness I could not measure.

The waning flames from my small fire rushed higher. A blast of cold air told me the deerskin cover over my doorway had been pushed aside.

It was there in my hut, standing close behind me. Hot, wet breath touched the back of my neck. It stank of fresh blood. I closed my eyes and continued the ancient chant of our people, even louder maybe.

I did not turn to look.

* * *

Somewhere in his nineties, not sure exactly, John Crow still remembered his great-grandfather's stories with vivid clarity. He and other children had crowded into his hut on the Washoe County Indian Reservation to listen to stories of the gold rush days in the 1850s. On cold winter nights, they'd turned their backs to the fire, somehow warmer, watching the reflection of the flames flicker in his great-grandfather's eyes, the way they must have looked that night, so long ago.

His great-grandfather's shadow from the open fire would sway and skip across slats on the wall behind him, a magical, fearful dance; a sharp, clear memory.

His great-grandfather had told of how he'd warned the miners not to use explosives to tear up the earth, and not to use acids to purify their raw ore. They were fouling the streams and river in this sacred place of the Paiute.

They had refused to listen to a young Indian hired to provide them with fresh meat.

The morning after the slaughter, the few survivors from outlying camps had looked at him with unjust suspicions. Why had this Indian been spared while so many of their friends lay mutilated and headless, frozen into blood-soaked snow? Everybody, including his great-grandfather, had packed up and left, leaving those frozen bodies for the wolves.

Maybe some had received a decent burial. The church cemetery had some very old, unmarked graves. Willis had never mentioned the old graves.

In fact, nobody ever spoke of what had happened only ten years earlier, that night when terror had again entered this valley.

John climbed onto his front porch, near the giant Douglas fir. On the far side of the valley, shadows crept up the face of the mountain, still some daylight, a good time of day for memories; mostly good.

It had been at the annual mustang roundup down in Reno where he'd first met Jethro and Mary Lou Potter. Jethro had asked John's advice on horses and had purchased all three that John had recommended. They'd hired John on the spot and brought him here to this sacred valley. He had not yet grown to full manhood.

It had taken a few years for John to realize where he was. He could not recall the exact circumstances of his enlightenment.

No matter.

Jethro had purchased the whole valley from the land office down in Sacramento in 1935, not knowing about the gold or about those early miners, the ones from John's great-grandfather's stories. That had been the beginning of the Potter Ranch.

In those early days, Willis Donner had been the only other resident, living up on the Perch, a high granite dome that overlooked the entire valley. The Perch and John

Crow's place were separated by a fast-moving stream, impossible to cross from this lofty height.

Around 1940, Jethro and Mary Lou had given Willis clear title to the Perch and about five acres surrounding it, including a small lake and hot spring. Willis had already occupied the Perch since before Jethro and Mary Lou's arrival.

A year later, they'd given John Crow title to one acre, across the stream from Willis. The reason given had been, for services already rendered.

John could see most of the valley from his front porch.

Willis could see the whole valley from the Perch.

John had never felt the fear described by his great-grandfather, not once in all the seasons that had passed, not even after realizing where he was, not until that night ten years past. Since that night, fear fell over the valley with each coming of the full moon.

We must never forget.

John stepped down and walked out from under the overlapping roof planes of his teepee-shaped house. He turned and looked west, over the top of the sheer cliff into

which Willis had set long redwood logs supporting the high point of his steeply pitched roof. It looked like a tepee.

Well, half a tepee.

He'd been angry with Willis at the time, thinking Willis was mocking John's Indian heritage.

Not Willis.

He swelled with pride, looking at it. It was a fine house. It perfectly fit the nature of this sacred valley.

Home.

The sun had gone behind the mountain.

Time to prepare.

The family of chipmunks downhill from John's house poked their heads out from their underground homes, saying goodbye to the day, chirping at one another, at the twilight, at John.

A hawk swooped down and they all ducked into hiding. The hawk rose on the breeze, floated over the tall trees near the house, pulled its wings back, and plunged into

the forest. The shrill scream of a squirrel announced the hawk's success. He'd found his supper.

The way of nature.

John inhaled deeply of the pungent odor of wolf bane, those night blooming red flowers Willis had scattered about, thicker near John's house. They looked native to the terrain, same as his house.

White smoke hovered above the village, five miles up the valley, rising from the big wood-burning stove in Jacobsen's Emporium, getting ready for the night. The shadow of the mountain had already settled over the village, creeping down the valley toward the Potter Ranch.

Time to prepare.

John climbed back onto his porch, forever amazed by the craftsmanship, the tightly fitted stone and timber of his house, the stone buttress design at the bottom and the way the windows had been so tightly fitted. Willis had a God-given talent, appreciated by everyone but Kidro Potter. Kidro cared only for Kidro.

Getting late.

The full moon rising over the eastern rim stood in stark contrast to the darkening sky, the beginning of a clear night.

Early moonlight on his three-inch thick, solid oak door highlighted the pattern Willis had chiseled into it. The geometric, interconnecting lines resembled a bird in flight, a crow, perhaps, or one of Willis's beloved meadowlarks.

A chill crossed his shoulders, his humbling admiration for such fine craftsmanship. He crossed the threshold, closed his door, and dropped the heavy oak bar into place, a solid barrier against whatever might come. He moved across the upper stone floor and secured the narrow, thick oak shutters over the windows.

Nothing could get inside.

With his fortress secure, John grabbed a match from over his wood-burning stove and lit an oil lamp. He trimmed and carried the lamp down stone steps into his large living space, where he'd spread Navajo rugs over the clean, white-sand floor.

He set the lamp on a table Willis had carved from a fat tree trunk and knelt to light the kindling in his already prepared fireplace. Dry slivers ignited quickly, spread to

twigs, leapt from twigs, and crawled up the sides of heavier logs. Heat grew quickly, forcing him to step back.

He fingered the well-worn Bible on the mantle and wondered if this night was from God, or from something else? He'd found no answers from this Bible, not after all these years.

He'd never been able to understand the nature of a night like the one now at hand; not from any sources known to him. His great-grandfather's stories lacked any explanation.

Over these many years, it hadn't come with each full moon. Even after they discovered it would take a young bull calf and leave people alone, it hadn't always come. Maybe it hunted in different places.

Nobody knows.

Why the residents in this valley hadn't left held no mystery for John. This valley was an unnaturally healthy place to live.

John knelt in front of the fire, pulled his medicine pouch from around his neck, opened it, and emptied its contents onto the rug. He studied the pile of small sticks,

smooth stones, and tiny pieces of bone. After seeing how they lay, he swept up the pile and tossed it into the air, watching the bits and pieces fall again, studying their pattern.

Tonight, it will come.

The hair on his neck stood, with the feeling of an unseen, spiritual force. He threw his head back and lifted his voice in the ancient, melodic chant of his forefathers. Maybe it would help protect him and his lifelong neighbors.

Yes, even Kidro.

* * *

Kidro Potter sat at the dining table Willis Donner had built into the wide bay window that jutted from the side of the Potter kitchen. The wood framed kitchen had been built over the top of the stone-walled carriage house which had become his garage. Being so high up, the kitchen didn't need iron bars or protective shutters. From there, Kidro could see up River Road to the village and all the way around to his lower meadow, where fine, sleek, Black Angus cattle grazed near the brook that wound its way into the tall timber forest at the lower end of his valley.

Down in that forest, the brook took the runoff from the lower hot spring and emptied into the river. Just beyond, the river flowed strong over the falls and down to Pickle Meadow, Leavitt Meadow Recreation Area, and the Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center. The Marines had never ventured into Kidro's valley.

Only a few big trees grew in his lower meadow, those that found deep boulders to hold their roots. The ground was otherwise too soft to support tall trees. Patches of brush hugged portions of the brook and tall grass covered the rest.

His young heifers and steers would be ready for market in another month. The remainder were breeders, sold to canned goods companies when they grew too old.

Every summer he let the Basques drive in herds of sheep to crop grass in both the upper and lower meadows. In return, each year, his family members had received a young lamb and a fine, handmade, sheepskin coat. The trade cost him nothing. The grass needed to be cut. His cattle preferred the feed corn he placed in bins near the brook. Corn produced better beef, anyway.

Yep. Kidro Potter raised some of the finest table beef in California. In the country.

In the world.

He poured his second glass of Canadian Club rye whiskey, recapped the bottle, and sipped.

He enjoyed this time of day, sipping whiskey. With the sun long gone, the thin clouds over the western rim had turned pink, orange, and gold. Some might call this a beautiful sunset, those who enjoyed such things.

J. J. enjoyed these sunsets; as had his wife, before she got taken.

A little down from the rim and high up the slope, John Crow's house was already shuttered and dark. A thread of white smoke swirled and dissipated into the evergreen trees above the cliff. That stinking Indian had already prepared for the night.

Arrogant squatter.

That stupid, superstitious Indian was his closest neighbor. Kidro didn't have much use for Indians in general, and he'd never liked this one, a real know-it-all when it came to horses.

Across the ravine from Crow's, above the waterfall, lamplight winked through treetops from the Perch, Willis Donner's place. The glass reflected sunlight in the

daytime and lamplight at night were constant reminders of Willis's so-called right to be there. Kidro hated that squatter the most.

Kidro's parents had always treated Willis like a favored member of the family, and Kidro had always resented him for it.

Kidro would never be able to get Willis or Crow out. That knowledge gnawed his gut near every night, looking up at their two properties, both properly registered down in Sacramento. He hated himself for hating both of them and doing nothing about it.

He squirmed on the cushioned bench and turned to look up River Road; still no sign of Nason. He drained the last of his whiskey and looked into the adoring stare of Scooter, his Springer Spaniel, sitting on the polished stone floor, patiently waiting.

He knows.

"Nason's always late, isn't he?" Kidro smiled at his dog's sweeping tail, back and forth across the floor.

"You're right." Kidro set the glass next to the whiskey bottle and stood, feeling soreness in his left knee where Gilpin's horse had pinned him against the lower corral

rail. At age sixty-eight, Kidro didn't heel as quickly as he once had. He'd probably limp for a month, maybe for the rest of his empty life.

Stupid horse.

Kidro forced himself to walk through the pain to the kitchen door. He lifted his lightweight Levi jacket from a hook and put it on. He made it through the living room with only a slight limp and climbed three stone steps to the entry foyer. He dragged his heavy, black Stetson hat from the deer antler rack Willis had mortared into the stone wall before Kidro could remember. He poked the hat onto his head, opened his new factory-made entry door, and followed Scooter outside.

As long as Kidro lived, Willis Donner would never hang another door. Not on Kidro's property.

Scooter shot down the stone steps and rounded the corner of the garage before Kidro could shut the door.

Pain forced Kidro to use his right leg, limping down the steps, keeping his left knee straight like some kind of cripple. Climbing down steps seemed worse than climbing up. He hated pain any way it came.

That stupid horse cost too much, five hundred bucks and an Angus bull calf.

He wove his way up the rocky path through tall pine and limped out of the woods into his upper meadow, where stubby grass mixed with sagebrush grew in rocky soil. He followed Scooter up the well-worn trail, limping more instead of less.

No stupid canes or crutches for Kidro. He'd work out the stiffness.

“Stupid horse.”

Scooter reached that flat stone far ahead of Kidro, chasing those ever-present meadowlarks, howling and baying until the swirling, yellow breasted birds filled the sky. The dog almost never barked, earning Kidro's constant gratitude, but he allowed it for chasing these stupid birds, always singing stupid bird songs.

Kidro had never liked noisy things, especially noisy people like Gilpin. He gritted his teeth, hating Gilpin more with each painful step. That was the one good thing about this sore leg. It gave Kidro another reason to hate Bruce Gilpin.

Always late, Nason's truck sped over the crest in a cloud of dust and slid to a stop near that flat rock.

“What the . . .”

Kidro's Angus bull calf stood in back, the one he'd just traded to Gilpin.

Broad shouldered and fit for forty, Sheriff Phil Nason stepped out of his four door Ford pick-up and walked to the back.

"Gilpin gave you that calf?"

Nason shook his head with a tired dip toward Kidro. "Pounded on his trailer for five minutes." He dropped the tailgate, climbed into the back, and untied the calf. "I know they were around. His truck was parked in front and I could smell refer, like walking into a hippy house in Berkeley." He lifted and carried the small calf to the back of his truck.

Kidro took and set the calf on the ground, gritting against the pain in his leg.

Nason climbed down and picked up the calf. "I found this one in Gilpin's barn, nursing from his milk cow. That idiot's got pot hanging and drying everywhere. I should just arrest his ass. If not for his wife and kid, I would."

"He's probably got a grower's permit. I heard his brother owns one of those marijuana pharmacies down below."

Nason set the calf on the ground, his wry grin admitting the probability of a grower's permit.

"You know how much I hate this?" Kidro followed Nason and the calf onto the wide, flat, blood-stained rock. The surrounding grass stood thick and green, a perfect place for meadowlarks to nest and feed on bloodworms.

Kidro wished Scooter could chase them off for good, knowing Willis Donner loved the stupid things.

Nason tied the lead-rope to the bronze ring he and Embry had installed at the stone's center, maybe five years back. He straightened and stared at Kidro, mystified.

"Hate what?"

"Oh, you know what I mean; this monthly ritual. I hate paying any kind of tribute to that son-of-a-bitch, offering up a sacrifice like he's a god or something."

"Kidro, we both know it's not him. If he could, he'd probably kill that thing himself."

"Ah . . ." Deep down, Kidro knew Nason was right, but the hurt from that night, ten years before, seemed like yesterday.

He changed direction, getting to what he really wanted to talk about. "I'm thinking about reopening one of the mines." Not that he needed anybody's permission.

Nason thought about it, obviously searching for words. He turned and looked up the valley toward the village. "You still carrying that torch? You still need to do big things, prove something to your father?" He turned back and stepped closer, making sure to be understood. Hard to see his eyes, getting dark. "He's dead for what, twenty years now?"

"What're you talking about?" Kidro didn't need to prove anything to anybody. He could do whatever he wanted on his land.

"Isn't that what happened ten years ago?"

And there it was, everybody blaming Kidro for what had happened.

Kidro said, "What do you mean? We haven't taken out any ore since Mother and Dad bought those war bonds during World War II. Willis helped in the mine every day."

"Kidro, didn't you have this argument with your mother ten years ago?"

"You saying, I don't have the right?" He leaned closer to Nason and sharp pain gripped his left leg. "Not even Mother told me I didn't have the right. She knew I needed

to make my own fortune, ever since Dad died. That's all that bothered her, not that I shouldn't ought to do it." He shook his head, remembering. "She always had everything all worked out." *Never needed me.*

Nason shook his head, disappointed. "Haven't you got enough, Kidro?"

"What good is all my money, if I've got no one to enjoy it with?"

"You never worry about consequences, Kidro. I'm the one has to worry about what might happen."

"You want me to get somebody else?" *I don't want that.*

"You can take it up with the committee if you want. That's how your mom set it up, so you Potters wouldn't have total control over who's the sheriff, or who runs the bank, or who pastor's the church and runs the school." Nason gritted his teeth and clammed up, looking steamed over this.

Not good.

Nason always protected the smaller ranchers but he didn't understand anything. Kidro said, "I'm tired of being alone. I need an heir."

"J. J.'s still around, somewhere. He'll come home. Wait and see."

“That night, when . . .” Kidro staggered backward and planted his stiff left leg, not willing to give another inch, but the words stuck in his throat like a sideways fishbone.

Shake it off.

Kidro said, “That night, after his mother and brother died, J. J. never forgave me. Then, after Mom died, when I fired John and Willis, he said he never wanted to see me again and left.”

Nason put a friendly hand on Kidro’s shoulder. “Yeah . . . well . . . Kids say a lot of things. I mean, didn’t he cash out that trust your mother set up? I think he was out of the Corps by then.”

“That was over five years ago and we’ve heard nothing since. I’ve been thinking, what if he never does come back? What if he can’t come back?”

“What good will opening the mines do?”

“I can get some new faces up here, you know, interview some folks and hire a housekeeper.”

“What’s wrong with Bee Ralston?”

“You know what I mean. If I can get a nice looking, single gal up here . . .” He looked into Nason. “Maybe get married, have another kid.”

“Can’t you do that anyway? I mean, why open the mine?”

Kidro had no answer for that one.

Nason said, “I always thought you hated having anybody else around, that you wanted this whole valley to yourself.”

Kidro had no answer for that one either.

A blaring horn changed the subject.

Down the slope, Gilpin’s pickup truck turned off River Road and churned dust, climbing up the dirt road toward Kidro’s upper meadow. All but the dust disappeared in the dip behind the crest.

Kidro said, “I told you he wouldn’t like it.” He spit at the flat rock. “I hate this stupid ritual.” He hated the squatters. Without the Potter Ranch, none of them would survive a single winter. *And maybe that’s the answer.* Why should he help them in the first place?

Nason squared his hat, badge in front, getting ready. "Gilpin's not like everybody else, is he?"

Gilpin's truck crossed the crest with a roar. Inside the cab, his round head jerked back, surprised by the nearness of Nason's truck. Gilpin's older Chevy hit the ground in a skid, shuddering to a stop in a swirling cloud of dust, not quite soon enough. He bumped Nason's lowered tailgate and put a crease in the center of the chrome trim.

Not seeming to care about Nason's truck, Bruce Gilpin leapt from his truck and waddled toward Nason, grabbing at his crotch like he had jock-itch or something.

Kidro grinned at the thought.

Gilpin said, "What do you think you're doing?"

"What are you talking about?" Nason pointed at his dented tailgate, angrier than Kidro had ever seen him. "You numb cup of sheep dip, look what you did."

"So, sue me." Gilpin stretched out his leg and scratched his crotch.

Jock-itch for sure.

Nason pulled off his hat and used it like a shield, holding Gilpin at arm's length. "I called you this morning and left a message with Sally. Just now, I banged on your door

for five minutes.” Gilpin stepped sideways and they circled one another like two Tijuana roosters.

Kidro smiled, hoping feathers would fly. He couldn't help it. Gilpin wouldn't stand a chance.

Bold as can be, Gilpin said, “I was up on my graze getting a calf.”

Kidro and Nason looked to the back of Gilpin's empty truck. They both knew he was lying. Kidro said, “Needs to be a bull calf.” He looked up at the sky and back at Gilpin “It's already dark.”

“Why from me? I never understood that. We don't even live in this valley.”

Nason said, “You attended our school. You shop at the emporium. Like it or not, we're neighbors.”

“So, I shop at the store. So what? It's a store.”

Kidro said, “You use my bank and you drive on my roads.”

Gilpin turned on Kidro, eager to tumble in the dust with a much older man. “I just traded you Stoner for that calf. My bull's getting old and impotent. I need that calf.”

Stupid. “You should have thought of that before you cut your young bulls.” Kidro stepped forward, angry enough to smack Gilpin’s fat face.

Gilpin lunged.

Nason deftly slid between them and grabbed Gilpin’s arm, blocking his attempted punch at Kidro. “It’s getting late.” Nason forcibly shoved Gilpin toward his truck.

Gilpin craned over the top of Nason and shouted, “I’m not giving it up! Not to no grizzly, I’m not. I got my rifle in my truck. I’ll kill it myself.”

“Been tried,” said Kidro, thinking about ten years past, thinking about himself and both of his sons shooting it all those times. “. . . by better men than you.”

Still controlling Gilpin, Nason said, “The Village Committee will take care of it, Bruce. Get back in your truck and go home.”

Gilpin ripped free.

Nason used his hat again, steadily herding Gilpin toward the trucks. After a couple of quick sidesteps, blocking Gilpin, Nason opened the door to Gilpin’s truck, ushered him inside, and closed the door.

Gilpin started his truck and slowly backed away, impossible to read his face in the dark. The fool might be planning something stupid.

Kidro didn't care.

"What a pud!" Nason propped his hat on the back of his head and fingered his dented tailgate.

Kidro said, "Yeah, those Gilpins are a brood apart."

Nason chuckled and closed his tailgate with care, no damage to the hinges. He shook his head, pulled off his hat, and climbed into the driver's seat. He started his truck, smiled, turned on his headlights, and slowly backed away.

Kidro turned for home, snapped his fingers, and Scooter followed.

Those stupid birds rose above the treetops. Their swirling blur nearly blocked the light from the rising moon.

* * *

Gilpin smoked a joint and waited on the other side of River Road, backed under the low, wide-spread branches of a giant sequoia, hoping Nason wouldn't see his truck. He couldn't let those two pull this kind of scam on him.

Not today. Not this Gilpin.

Those two wimps were afraid to deal with a dumb animal. He took a hit from the fat, sweet tasting marijuana cigarette and set it in the ashtray.

There.

Nason's headlights moved slowly down the dirt road from Potter's upper meadow. He turned right onto River Road and sped toward the village.